



Finding the Truth II:

Are Popular Nutrition and Health Information Sources Reliable?

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When the American Dietetic Association conducted a “trends” survey in 2000, it found TV, magazines and newspapers were top information sources for nutrition and health, while healthcare professionals, including physicians, dietitians and others with advanced training, were much less likely to be named.

We’re all bombarded with information about nutrition and health. We might hear a celebrity discussing a new diet on a radio or TV talk show. We might watch an “infomercial” about a fitness device. While reading our favorite magazine, an advertisement might alert us to a new “low carb” food product. A friend might forward an e-mail pointing out the risks of a food additive. We might receive an advertisement for a new dietary supplement in our mailbox, or we could pick up information sheets at a health food or grocery store. While surfing the Internet, we might click on a Web site with questionable nutrition information.

With all this information available, how do we separate fact from fiction? What are the clues to reliable health information in today’s fast-paced world?

This publication will explore a few popular nutrition information sources and ways to determine if information is reliable. For more information, request “Finding the Truth I” (FN-569) from your local extension office.

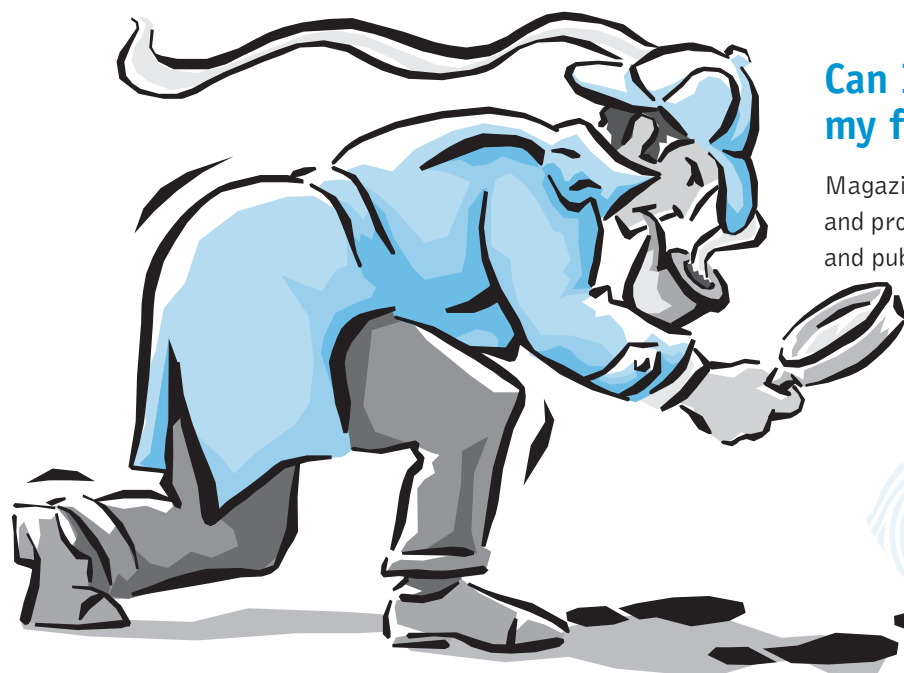
Can I trust nutrition information in my favorite magazine?

Magazines are popular sources of nutrition information, and professionals have evaluated nutrition-related articles and published magazine ratings.



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The American Council on Science and Health reported the reliability of representative articles in 20 popular magazines published in 2000, 2001 and 2002. It judged the overall content of factual information, objective presentation of the information and recommendations. The magazines received overall ratings of “excellent,” “good” or “poor.” Remember, too, that the researchers only checked a sample of nutrition articles, not all the articles.

Ratings of popular magazines by the American Council on Science and Health

Just shy of “Excellent”

Cooking Light
Parents
Ladies Home Journal

“Good”

Better Homes and Gardens
Good Housekeeping
Consumer Reports
Reader’s Digest
Redbook
Woman’s Day
Glamour
Self
Health
Runner’s World
Prevention
Shape
Fitness

“Fair”

Cosmopolitan
Men’s Health

“Poor”

Men’s Fitness
Muscle and Fitness



Should I believe what I read about foods and dietary supplements on advertisements?

Can I believe food labels?

Ads and food labels have different purposes. The goal of advertising is to sell a product. Food labels are meant to inform consumers what’s in a particular food. Advertisements for diet, fitness and health products are overseen by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Food labels, including Nutrition Facts labels, and health claims, are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Any statement listed on a food package must meet the guidelines of the FDA. For example, “low-fat” foods must have less than 2.5 grams of fat per serving and “low-calorie” foods must have less than 35 calories per serving.

If a product has a claim that says it is “heart healthy,” strict guidelines must be met. When it comes to weight loss ads and other health/fitness products, the FTC recommends a “healthy portion of skepticism.”

Example: “Low-Carb Foods”

In 2004, numerous products reached the marketplace advertised as “low carb.” Since no legal definition for “low carb” existed, food products could not legally be labeled “low carb” on the package.

Can you lose weight on high-protein, “low carb” diets? Yes, you can lose weight on any diet that’s lower in calories than what you’re burning; however, most people regain weight unless they have made a lifestyle change. Nutrition professionals recommend a balanced, varied diet with all foods eaten in moderation.

Are low-carb foods and diets healthier? Nutrition researchers don’t know all the answers, because most of the studies are less than six months long. Nutrition researchers do have concerns about focusing on foods high in protein and fat. Many health professionals argue that over time, following such diets may put people at risk for heart disease, kidney disease, osteoporosis, gout and other health issues.

■ See links to health information at the end of the circular.

Example: Dietary Supplements

Dietary supplements include vitamins, minerals, herbs, fiber and other items. They are overseen by the FDA but are not regulated as foods or drugs. The manufacturer does not have to prove the product is safe or effective. It’s up to the FDA to prove the supplements are unsafe in order to remove them from the market. In general, manufacturers do not have to register their product with FDA or get approval before selling their product. Product labels on supplements should be truthful and not misleading. **Choosing to use supplements, therefore, becomes a matter of “buyer beware.”**

Most supplement products will not hurt us, but many probably won’t help us. Some, like “once-a-day” type vitamin/mineral supplements, are actually recommended by many in the medical field. Other products could be harmful. Ephedra, a weight loss aid, was removed from the market after deaths were reported.

- If you choose to take a supplement, do your homework.
- Look for a “USP” designation, a measure of purity and potency of the product.



- Let your physician know what you're taking, because some supplements interact with medications.
- For vitamin/mineral supplements, read the "Supplement Facts" labels. Most nutrition professionals advise staying at 100 percent of the daily recommendations.
- Visit the Web site, **www.consumerlab.com**, an independent testing company that provides information about many popular supplements.

Should I trust "E-mail Scares"? What are some clues?

If you use e-mail, chances are you've received a few unsolicited advertisements about nutrition or health products. Or, maybe a friend has forwarded an e-mail about health that sounded a little "scary."

E-mail scares and hoaxes often give the appearance of credibility by citing organizations with impressive names, doctors, researchers and lots of medical/scientific jargon. Often the e-mails feature CAPITAL letters and lots of punctuation!!!!

An example that keeps resurfacing concerns the safety of Aspartame (sold as "Equal" or "NutraSweet"), an artificial sweetener used in many low-calorie foods. The e-mail scare blames Aspartame for causing a variety of illnesses, including multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia and others. The "Aspartame Disease" e-mail scare, however, is not research-based.

Aspartame is one of the most thoroughly tested substances in the food supply, and its use is regulated by the FDA.

The safety was confirmed in recent published study in which scientists found that consuming an amount far greater than an average person would consume (the equivalent of 19 to 24 cans of diet soda pop daily) had no effect on mood, memory, behavior or the brain in adult women. Therefore, consuming a moderate amount does not pose a risk.

One note of caution: Aspartame is not safe for those with phenylketonuria, or PKU, a rare genetic disorder. Infants are tested for this condition at birth, and, if diagnosed with this condition, a special diet throughout life is needed.

For more information about food additives, visit the FDA Web site: **www.fda.gov**

How reliable is the information on Web sites?

It depends. With billions of Web sites in cyberspace, a search for a particular health-related topic may result in hundreds of "hits." It can be difficult to decipher trustworthy information from quackery.

Sometimes, the URL suffix (e.g. ".gov" used by many government agencies or ".edu" used by many educational institutions) gives an indication of the reliability of the information. Web sites with a ".com" suffix are sometimes reliable organization sites and sometimes purely commercial.

Ask these questions as you explore nutrition and health information:

- Who is the author?
- What are his or her credentials?
- Is a credible sponsoring institution identified?
- What is the purpose of the information?
- Is the site promoting or selling a particular product?
- Is the information based on scientific research or opinion?
- Is a date listed? How current is the information?
- Are there links to other sources of information? (This sometimes provides a clue to reliability, but not always. Anyone can link to another organization's Web site.)
- Are the facts documented with sound scientific references? Or, is the information solely based on personal testimonials?
- Is there an editorial board that oversees the content?
- Is the information well-written in terms of grammar and spelling? What is the tone of the writing? Does it take a balanced approach?




Whom do I trust to provide accurate information?

Consulting a “nutritionist” doesn’t necessarily mean you’re getting reliable nutrition information. It’s easy to get a “fake degree” in nutrition, and most states allow anyone to use the title “nutritionist.” The person using the title may have no formal academic courses in nutrition. Often you just have to pay a fee to get a “certificate.”

A person with the title, “licensed nutritionist” (LN), however, has completed specific academic coursework and met other licensure requirements to use the title. Licensed nutritionists in North Dakota also have to meet continuing education requirements.

Registered dietitians (RDs) complete an undergraduate degree from an accredited institution with courses in nutrition, food science and many other subjects, complete internship hours and pass a national examination. Some work in clinical settings like hospitals, and others work in public health, extension service offices, foodservice management, food industry or other places.

Extension agents usually have degrees in family and consumer sciences, food and nutrition, education or a related area. Some are licensed nutritionists, and some are registered dietitians. All receive regular training in nutrition and food safety and distribute research-based information.



**For research-based
information, visit your
county office of the
NDSU Extension
Service.**



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www.ndsu.edu/ndnc/

Visit these Web sites for more information:

- **American Dietetic Association (ADA)** provides information on nutrition and health.
www.eatright.org
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** provides health information on diseases, health risks and prevention guidelines.
www.cdc.gov
- **Consumer Lab** identifies the best quality health and nutrition products through independent testing. www.consumerlab.com
- **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** regulates food, drugs and oversees dietary supplements. www.fda.gov/
- **Federal Citizen Information Center** provides consumer information on topics ranging from food/health to computers and cars.
www.pueblo.gsa.gov/
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC)** provides resources on avoiding scams and ripoffs.
www.ftc.gov/ftc/consumer.htm
- **Healthfinder** is a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gateway site that provides links to reviewed resources on consumer health.
www.healthfinder.gov
- **Quackwatch** is a nonprofit corporation that combats health-related fraud and myths.
www.quackwatch.org
- **Tufts Nutrition Navigator** rates the accuracy of nutrition and health-related Web sites.
www.navigator.tufts.edu

NDSU Extension Service: has many online publications and links to all of the above and many other reliable information sources.
www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/food.htm

For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu



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